

September 30, 2020

Re: Request for Information Interim Charge COVID-19

Hon. Chairman Huberty, Vice Chairman Bernal, and members of the House Committee on Public Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information and responses to the COVID-19 interim charge put forward by the Texas House Committee on Public Education. Leadership ISD (LISD) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to equip community leaders to advance academic excellence and racial equity in public education through advocacy, policy, and school board governance. Over the past ten years, LISD has built a powerful network of thousands of grassroots leaders across the state from all walks of life. Our network includes educators, parents, students, community and business leaders, as well as policymakers - all of whom are concerned about the future of public schools across the state of Texas.

LISD convened two legislative listening circles this month to gather feedback from our network regarding the formal request for information COVID-19 interim charge put forward by the House Committee on Public Education on August 19, 2020. Approximately one hundred stakeholders joined our virtual listening sessions from various parts of the state, including Fort Worth, Dallas, Houston, Round Rock, San Antonio, Aldine, DeSoto and several other mostly urban and suburban communities. Participants were educators, parents, concerned community members and central office administrators from various school districts who were each very concerned about the impacts of COVID-19 on education.

LISD's response to the interim charge is rooted in the voices of the stakeholders we convened, as they are on the ground and are dealing with the crisis head on. Our goal for the listening circles was to facilitate a conversation through which we could uplift the voices and multiple perspectives of these stakeholders to inform your work as state-level policymakers. After our convenings, our staff identified common themes reflected in our conversations and have summarized those findings below.

- 1. Are Texas public schools ensuring the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff during the 2020 Fall Semester? When applicable, please speak directly to classroom, lab settings, and cafeterias.**

While school districts across the state are working tirelessly to help keep students, faculty and staff safe this fall semester, there is still a significant need for increased support and resources. Based on the listening circle conversations we hosted, we understand that school districts have had to adapt, make plans, change plans, and respond to local health and safety guidelines. All of

this, of course, has been in a constant state of flux since the beginning of the pandemic. As a result, families and educators have a high level of frustration and uncertainty about how schools are ensuring the health and safety of students, faculty and staff during COVID-19.

Responses from families: For families and students, many expressed that there has been a lack of clear communication from schools and districts. Families have struggled to understand the safety protocols and precautions taken by campuses and, in many cases, have had to make decisions about enrolling their children in-person or virtually with very little time and very little information. Some parents expressed difficulty in understanding communication given by districts, saying that they were given 50 page documents issued by the Texas Education Agency that were overwhelming and inaccessible for a general audience, much less for families whose primary language is not English. Generally, families expressed dissatisfaction with communication from schools and a lack of clarity regarding the protocols and procedures put in place to keep their children safe. Additionally, families expressed a resounding need for improved technology, both in terms of access to devices and wifi and in terms of understanding how to use devices, apps, and other tech to engage more fully in their child's education. Families felt strongly that having technology resources in place would help keep schools safer by allowing various options and vehicles for instruction.

Responses from educators: Educators who participated in our listening circles expressed concerns about the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE), barriers to social distancing on campuses, and an inadequate amount of time to prepare for a return to in-person classes. Many of the educators who participated in our listening circles also talked about the need to address the socio-emotional and/or mental health needs of both students and educators. COVID-19 has not only impacted the physical well-being of many, but has also added a tremendous amount of stress and anxiety to an already overstretched workforce. Additionally, educators who work with special needs students expressed a need to be able to conduct behavioral assessments safely in order to ensure students receive necessary accommodations, supports, and instruction.

Recommendations: Based on the perspectives we heard during our conversations, LISD urges the Texas State Legislature to consider the following recommendations in order to help protect the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff in Texas public schools:

1) Incorporate Equitable Community and Family Engagement in School Safety Plans:

While the concept of community and family engagement in education is not new, COVID-19 has shown a bright light on the importance of schools, communities, and families working together. A recent survey conducted by the National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement of 1,552 educators, administrators, parent leaders, and family engagement professionals found that 93% of respondents believe

that families should be partners in the school reopening planning process, yet only 64% felt that the leaders of their school system valued the role that families play in their children's success.¹ Texas legislatures should support school district's efforts to engage families of diverse backgrounds to better understand how to best serve and support them and offer differentiated support that best meets the needs of families. Additionally, the legislature should provide support to school districts to train educators on how to effectively engage families in the new context of COVID-19.

- 2) Support the Socio-emotional Health and Well-Being of Students and Staff:** Part of ensuring the health and safety of students, faculty and staff requires our systems of public education to also address their socio-emotional health and well-being. Many families and students have had to deal with job losses, economic insecurity, and the loss of loved ones due to COVID-19. Educators are in a very similar situation and are having to navigate the demands of family responsibilities, educating their own children, in addition to dealing with the pandemic and its impact on the health of their friends and families. During LISD's listening circles, this was an issue that surfaced multiple times - schools, educators, and families need increased access to social services, counselors, and mental health tools and strategies to help ease the stress and anxiety many are facing. In addition, both families and educators expressed a need for schools to minimize the punitive consequences and pressures of statewide testing and accountability. The Texas State Legislature should support the development of school district plans to address the socio-emotional health and well-being of students and staff and create a plan that minimizes the pressures of STAAR testing this school year.
- 3) Expand Efforts to Close the Digital Divide:** Another resounding theme we heard in our listening circles was the need to improve the technological infrastructure of school districts. In addition, both families and educators expressed concern with the ability of families to effectively use devices, especially those with limited experience using tablets and other devices. School administrators also expressed frustration with the lack of access to technology like laptops, hot spots, etc. and with the lack of adequate bandwidth in communities. Without the technological infrastructure to support online learning, the health and safety of students, families, and educators is greatly at risk. We applaud the state's efforts to close the digital divide through the use of the CARES Act and the procurement of devices and hotspots through Operation Connectivity. We urge the Texas State Legislature to provide additional support to school districts to help families learn how to use devices and to help school districts assess and identify communities that lack broadband access and access to devices.

Leadership ISD and our network of advocates has long advocated for an excellent and equitable education for all Texas children. Disparities in achievement along lines of race, income, and language existed well before COVID-19. Unfortunately, the pandemic has exacerbated these disparities and placed additional barriers and challenges for many Texas children and families. Ensuring the safety of students, faculty and staff is an incredibly important step in working toward addressing those disparities, though it is only beginning. Our students deserve and have a right to a high quality education that prepares them to achieve their boldest dreams. It is our hope that as an organization, with our network of grassroots advocates, we can work together with you and local communities to not only mitigate the effects of COVID-19, but to build a system of education that is truly excellent and equitable.

We appreciate your dedication and your service in the Texas legislature. Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback and to uplift the voices of our LISD network.

Sincerely,

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1. National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, “NAFSCE Recommendations on Engaging Families in School Reopening,” https://cdn.ymaws.com/nafsce.org/resource/resmgr/policy/NAFSCE_Recommendations_on_En.pdf (accessed September 29, 2020)